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SOLNESS: A STUDY OF IBSEN'S DRAMATIC  
METHOD.<sup>1</sup>

More and more, it seems, as the years of our century near its close, the nations that take part in literature are led to concentrate their attention upon Ibsen. For each nation, indeed, there are literary movements that seem within the narrower circle, to be more important. But, for the nations taken as a catholic group, there is no other recurring event of literature so important, none other so sure to be discussed with interest and passion, as the annual play that the great Norwegian gives to the world. Thus the edition published in Copenhagen, that gives us the original text of his last play, has on its first page the legal notice of simultaneous publication, in English, French, and German, in Russian, Hungarian, and Dutch, in Bohemian and Polish. The tiny volume that goes forth in such dainty form from the old printing house of the Gyldendals in Copenhagen, is more than any other publication of its year a literary event of world-wide significance. And the author of the volume takes, toward the world at large, more fully than any other living writer, that place of literary primacy which Voltaire held in the eighteenth century and Gœthe in the early nineteenth. This is the recognition fairly due to the man, who, in handling the highest and

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<sup>1</sup> *Bygmester Solness*. Sknespil i Tre Akter, af Henrik Ibsen. København, 1892, pp. 220. *Mr. Solness, Builder and Architect*. A Drama in Three Acts, by Henry Ibsen, Copenhagen, 1892.

most difficult and most conservative of all poetic forms, the drama, has handled it, for good or for evil, in such a fashion as most of all men since Shakspeare to modify its laws and to intensify its effects.

It is, of course, only by placing each new poem in careful comparison with the one that went before, that we are able to estimate the amount and the specific direction of Ibsen's progress in dramatic skill. In this series, the *Solness*, of 1892, came next after the *Hedda Gabler*, of 1890.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile the poet had returned from what seemed a life of voluntary exile to make his home once more among his own Norwegian people. In this home-coming, he has been able to refresh and to sharpen his knowledge of contemporary Norwegian life, which, as often charged by his Scandinavian critics, had, in the long period of foreign residence, grown somewhat faint and inaccurate. Thus, as compared with *Hedda Gabler*, there may be found in *Solness* an even more intense realism. There is also a deeper feeling of the poetry of domestic life. But there is the same intensity of dramatic situation, the same unfailing microscopic skill in the portrayal of character, and, above all, the same precision and power in studying and tracing the sources and the growth of emotion. Thus both poems yield the same proof that the essence of Ibsen's method is the conversion of a lyrical force into a new and strange form of dramatic poetry. The rendering of emotion, as the special function of lyrical poetry, is the natural tendency of Ibsen's genius. But the invention and management of the story, so as best to explain and to display the emotion are something not so natural, an art acquired by intense study and developed, from play to play, with ever increasing skill. Thus, between the *Hedda Gabler* and the *Solness*, there is to be noted much difference in the details of dramatic construction, and a definite progress in the degree of technical skill

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<sup>1</sup>The dramatic construction of *Hedda Gabler* is discussed in my essay in *Shakspeariana*, for January, 1892, in detailed comparison with Shakspeare's method.

with which the problem and the situation are brought before us.

Even in choosing and formulating the dramatic problem, there is in the new poem a greater boldness of design and a deeper originality. In *Hedda Gabler*, for example, the problem is presented in the minute study of a young woman. She is, of course, as befits a heroine, full of physical charm and of intellectual brilliancy. She comes before us in the usual way, entangled in a complication of love and amorous intrigue, and she escapes from the entanglements and miseries of life by self-murder. Now young women have had for a long time, under the domination of romantic poetry, their full innings in dramatic art. They may be, in each case, all that the poet claims for them; and the various troubles of their hearts, in giving or seeking love, are always sure to move modern audiences. But, unless they do something very improper, the capacity of their lives for evolving dramatic problems and novel situations has been largely exhausted. In *Solness*, however, Ibsen boldly reduces the young woman and her romantic sentiments to a subordinate position. From her the interest of the problem is transferred to a mere man; and the man that is brought before us as the hero of the tragical story, is a man no longer young or handsome. He is an elderly man, a man immersed in the business and jealousies of professional life, bold in speculation, shrewd, hard, ungenerous, devoid of all romantic charms, subject even to prosaic fits of liver trouble and vertigo that make his wife very unhappy. And yet out of the homely, unattractive life of this middle-aged builder and land-speculator, Ibsen is able to evolve a dramatic problem of the most fascinating interest, and to develop the character into tragical grandeur of aspiration, suffering, and calamity. It is a transition that recalls the passage of Shakspeare's genius from the story of Romeo to the story of Lear; but it is a transition in some ways more difficult, and, in its full success, fully as amazing.

In thus dealing with the story of Halvard Solness, the poet has again laid his finger upon marriage, and not mere love-making, as the special domain of tragedy in modern life. Going one step farther in the same direction, he shows in the new poem, as compared with *Hedda Gabler*, that not the married life of the young, but the married life of the middle-aged, presents the most appalling misery that modern society opens to the poet's contemplation. Solness, a man of fifty, has found the way to fortune by marrying a rich wife and making sagacious use of her means. The old couple is childless, and the wife, rather foolish and feeble always, is now fallen into a condition of extreme prostration and dolefulness of spirits, incapable of sympathy with her husband's plans, querulous, jealous, and disagreeable. It is a situation that has its comic side, and this comic side comes out in Ibsen's picture in endless touches of grotesque humor. But, in reality, in spite of the situation's being common-place and comical, what situation of modern life can be more tragical than the hopeless misery of this man in the company and companionship of this woman? For young people, however sharp the anguish of the present, there is always the promptitude of hope and the elasticity of youthful hearts, to save them from despair. For old age, there is the speedy coming of death, the torpor of senile feeling, and the easy succumbing of the mind to mental decay, to save them from passing into long stages of passionate suffering. But for men and women of middle-age, entangled in the special troubles of their time of life, writhing under the sense of lost opportunities, and beholding the steady approach of days more and more dismal in the hopeless future, there is no natural escape from the tragical horror of their fate. This, then, is the situation that Ibsen has seized as containing in itself a new world, almost unexplored, of human misery, a situation more terrible in reality than that revealed in *Œdipus* or in *Lear*, a situation in so far novel for human art, as arising only in those forms of modern society in which

the ordinance of Christian marriage has outlived the reality of Christian belief. For the Christian the loss of happiness in the one life, through an unhappy marriage, is made bearable by the belief in that other stage of existence in which marriage shall not exist. But for the man or woman who, like old Solness, has no Christian faith, to serve as prop to marital duty, the unhappy marriage is the sum of all loss and of all misery. Thus, in the problem here presented, Ibsen deals in a large way with that immense problem which confronts the modern world. As Christian marriage is founded upon Christian faith, if the faith decay what is to become of the ordinance that reposes upon it? This is the practical problem whose presence gives such horror to all anticipations of the future, if that future is to be withdrawn from the control of Christian feeling. This, too, is the artistic problem that lies involved in Ibsen's treatment of Solness's married life.

The dramatic situation in which this problem is presented reveals itself, according to Ibsen's classical method, in the climax-scene of the poem. It is the twenty-seventh scene, in a series of forty-three, standing almost at the end of the second act (pp. 157-159). It is preceded by twenty-six scenes, filling one hundred and fifty-six pages, in which the characters are made known to us in all the essential facts of their lives, and with full portrayal of their moral, intellectual, and even physical personalities. It is followed by sixteen scenes, filling sixty-two pages, in which the results of Solness's passion are developed up to the awful moment of death.<sup>1</sup> This climax-scene, as revelation both of character and of emotion, and also of the dramatic problem involved, is worthy of most careful study. The characters that appear in it are Solness himself, and his wife, and the young

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<sup>1</sup> These numerical proportions between the two parts of the drama, that which precedes and that which follows the climax, give some insight into the method of Ibsen's construction. In *Solness*, the proportion is about seven to three. Shakspeare in the *Othello* has about four to three, and in *Roméo and Juliet* about six to three. Ibsen's method represents his greater development of detail-work in realistic delineation of character.

girl, Hilde Wangel, whose absurd admiration of the old architect has begun to inflame his passions.

In order to be off with the old love as first step in getting on with the new, Solness has just dismissed from his service another young woman of whom his wife has shown herself jealous. But the wife, knowing little else, knows her husband through and through. She suspects at once that Solness, in parting from the one girl, is only making ready to draw the other closer to him. She shows, therefore, a movement of jealousy and dislike toward Hilde. So Solness, in order to please and occupy his wife's mind, tells her that the day is come for them to take possession of the grand new house that he has been building for her. On that very afternoon, according to the pretty Scandinavian fashion, the garland of flowers, as sign of the completed building, is going to be hung on top of the little tower that crowns the roof. Now Miss Hilde, many years ago, had seen Solness with his own hands perform the ceremony of hanging the garland on the spire of the new church at Lysanger. She had admired him very much in that exalted position, and she felt a strong desire to see him do once more a feat so daring and picturesque. So she cried, in girlish ecstasy, "That will be delightful, to see you again so high up." But of late years Mr. Solness was grown much older, and he suffered from a rush of blood to the head, which made him easily dizzy in high places. He was fully aware of this danger, and up to the time Hilde spoke, he had no intention of climbing up in person to hang the garland. He meant to have the pretty ceremony performed by his foreman. His wife, knowing her husband's physical infirmity, was aghast at Hilde's suggestion. She said that it was utterly impossible for Solness to do such a thing. This unfortunate speech of his wife's threw her husband into a rage. Wishing to please the young girl, and at the same time to exhibit his youthful gallantry and physical prowess, he made up his mind of a sudden to climb the tower and with his own hands to hang the garland. His wife went on

to tell him how, on account of his weak head, he was unable even to go out on the verandah in front of his second story windows. This, of course, served only to swell her husband's mortification and rage. Thus his resolution fixed itself; and when Mrs. Solness ran off to summon the family physician, to prevent him from so mad an undertaking, Solness made his promise to Hilde to climb the tower. In this way, in this amusing scene of pure comedy, the climax of the tragedy is reached. It is here that the fate of Solness is decided.

This climax-scene, if studied line for line, is, in spite of its brevity and by reason of its homely and amusing details, a master-piece of dramatic skill. It is exquisite in its force of character-portrayal. It is the key to the dramatic situation, the result of all that has gone before, the cause of all that is to follow. Above all else, however, it is the full and complete revelation of the dramatic emotion. The old architect, ashamed of his own physical weakness and angered by his wife's exposure of it, is filled by the longing to rise above his own infirmity. He wishes to justify the young girl's admiration by showing himself in her eyes to be the strong and picturesque character that she, in her girlish fancy, has imagined him. Thus the decision that he reaches and the promise that he makes are the natural and inevitable result of his state of feeling. The scene displays, therefore, the infallible skill of Ibsen's psychological analysis. Given the circumstances of the situation, given the character of the man, his action could not be different from what it was, and his fate could not be other. In constructing this climax-scene and in deriving the dramatic action from the dramatic emotion, Ibsen shows the same kind of skill as Shakspere, and works by the same method to the attainment of the true dramatic unity.

It is never possible, however, to reach the full meaning of the climax-scene without knowing the sequence of those events that have brought the characters into that precise situation. Here, therefore, it is necessary to gather in the



threads of the story, and to bring before us the essential parts of Solness's life. This, as we have seen, makes the substance of that larger part of the poem which precedes the climax. And this portion of the drama, according to Ibsen's peculiar method, is constructed with a precision and completeness of arrangement that are unsurpassed in dramatic literature. It is an axiom of French criticism that *le théâtre est l'art des préparations*. In the sense in which this is true, Ibsen's method of constructing his dramatic situation may fairly be considered as the highest achievement in dramatic skill. Among the hundreds of details that are given, not one is given idly or at random. Each event in the story serves as preparation for other events that are to come. Not a word is spoken, not a hint let fall, that does not turn out to be necessary for the development of the action. Thus the story of the life and career of Solness stands before us with the completeness and solidity of historical reality.

At the moment when the action of the play begins, say in September, 1891, Halvard Solness, a man of about fifty years of age, was living in a busy and rapidly growing Norwegian city. He was an architect, engaged in full and lucrative practice of his profession. When first introduced to us he was in his office, half buried in piles of papers and drawings. The lamps were already lighted, so as to make the office work possible in the early darkness of the Norwegian afternoon. Near him, as his assistants in architectural work, he had an old man and his son, and as book-keeper and correspondent, a young woman. His office opened into his dwelling-house, a residence that befitted a man of wealth, rich with pretty hangings and fine mirrors and furniture, and with a profusion of autumnal flowers, gathered from his own garden. Across that garden, in full view from the verandah of the old house, rose the handsome new house, just ready for occupation, which he had built for his wife. The roof rose into a tower, whose somewhat extraordinary height attracted men's eyes and dominated the

landscape. In this new house, as in the old house, a subject of mockery to the neighbors, there was a set of rooms to be used as a nursery and play-room for children. But the man, prosperous in so many ways, was childless. Two boys, twins, had been some twelve or thirteen years before taken from him by death. In memory of them, there was not only the empty nursery in his grand new house, but the more frightful emptiness and despair in his own heart.

In physical appearance, Solness was hale and hearty for his age. His curly gray hair was cropt short, his moustache and eye-brows were dark and heavy. In his office, he wore a sack-coat of that curious grayish green which one sees so often in Scandinavian countries, and he had lying by him his soft hat of gray felt and his portfolio of papers. In movement of body and play of features, he was quick, impulsive, and nervous, a man of keenly sensuous nature, with intense craving for sympathy and love, for cheerful environment and a lively, happy life. By nature, he was frank and merry in his ways. Even now, at times, his laugh was hearty. But in the midst of worldly success, there had been laid upon this man the burden of great domestic sorrow. The death of his two boys, the solitude of his childless home, and the depressing influence of his feeble-minded, moping, and jealous wife, had lowered the tone of his naturally cheerful nature, and even impaired the working of his vigorous mind. Thus, little by little, his temper had become irritable, and he was fallen into a habit of brooding melancholy, which, to some close observers, had already seemed to indicate insanity. There had been, also, evil passages in his life, bad stories in the town about his intrigues with women. Thus, in the feeling of the townsfolk for him there was some element of distrust and dislike mingled with their respect for his wealth and distinction. And in his own feeling for the little world in which he lived, there was something of cynical scorn and suspicion, and a sullen dread of the coming time, when by failure of

his own intellectual powers, or by change of fashion in architecture, he might have to surrender to younger architects, of more elaborate education than his own, his foremost place in the profession.

For Halvard Solness was, both in his strength and in his weakness, a self-made man. He was born in a little country town. Poor, and without opportunity for any professional education, he had made himself an architect by sheer force of artistic impulse and personal energy. He had learned his art by working in his youth in the office of Knut Brovik, the very man that now, by change of fortune, he had as assistant and draftsman, in his own service. In those years of his enthusiastic boyhood, he had formed the habit of reading and acquired the passion for books. Those books he still kept by him in his handsome house ; and he recognized with terror, as sign of his own failing intellect, his incapacity any longer to enjoy them. In that wide course of reading, the charm of the Norse saga had developed the poetic side of his nature, and this now came back into his mind in many strange forms of haunting superstition. But, in those early years, the bent of his entire being was toward a fervent piety ; and his highest professional ambition was to use his professional skill for the glory of God, in the building of churches. It was in this way that he achieved distinction and won his place in Norway as a famous architect.

It was at this stage of his life, that he met a young girl, the daughter of rich parents, and won her love and married her. Her inheritance, one of the old historical houses of Norway, standing near the city in a great body of land, formed the starting point of his own fortune. This was probably the temptation that led him to marry her. And it was the sordid element in this marriage that changed his own character, broke down the ideals of his youth, and brought upon him those miseries of domestic life that pushed him to his moral ruin.

For, as so often happens, the young wife that he had

chosen stood as encumbrance upon the property that she had brought him. She was so feeble in mind, so immature in development, as to be unfit for the responsibilities of married life, or for companionship with her husband. Even after her marriage, her chief delight was in playing with the old dolls that she had treasured up from her nursery days. Her one pride, over against her plebeian husband, was in the glory of her old home, in its portraits and historical memories, in its ample gardens and aristocratic seclusion, and in the fine silk dresses and precious laces that she had inherited from her mother and grandmothers. She was unable to take part in her husband's intellectual life, unable to make him happy by her sympathy with his ambitions. For the marriage had changed for him all the aims and ideals of his profession. He was no longer willing to use his art for God's service in building churches. He was eager now, as a practical man, to cut up his wife's land into lots, to build houses upon them, and to swell his fortune by the sale of them. Against this scheme the young wife held out with stubborn obstinacy. There was a struggle between them in which the man's interest had to give way to the woman's sentiment. It was at this time that the conception of a crime fixed itself in Solness's mind. If the old house, all built, Norwegian fashion, of timber, now centuries old, could take fire and burn down, there would be the solution of the trouble. And there was, as he soon discovered, a dangerous flue in an old chimney, passing through the inflammable roof, that offered to his practised eye every chance of a conflagration. To mend that place seemed to him the abandonment of all his schemes; to leave it unmended seemed to leave the door open to all the chances of good luck. There was a long struggle in his mind whether to mend it or not, and the flue was never repaired.

While matters were in this plight his young wife bore him twins, a pair of boys, handsome and hearty. She passed safely through her confinement and, after three weeks, she

was well enough, one winter-day, about 1878, leaving the twins for the first time, to go out for a sleigh-ride with her husband. For him, as for her, on that happy day, in their common joy over their children, the shadow of dissension and unhappiness seemed to be forever lifted. While they were gone, the servants kindled up the fires in the old house. As Solness and his wife came driving home, they saw puffs of smoke pouring from the roof. By the time they reached their house, all was in flames. The two babies, indeed, were saved, and were carried with the young mother for shelter to a neighbor's house. But all the precious old furniture, the family pictures, the silks and the laces, and even the nine dolls of her childhood perished. For this loss, not even the saving of the babies was for Mrs. Solness, an adequate consolation. Her grief threw her into a fever; and, as she insisted, as a point of maternal duty, on nursing the babies at her own bosom, they fell sick and died. The mother recovered from her illness, to live on, more feeble-minded than ever, always henceforth moping and low-spirited, incapable of any interest or ambition or joy. The father was overwhelmed at first by the conviction that, by leaving the faulty flue unrepaired, he had been the cause of the fever and thus of the death of his own boys. But, on investigation, it turned out, that the fire had started in another part of the house, and that the flue had, in reality, nothing to do with it. Thus the sense of real and active guilt in the matter passed away from his mind. But the trouble of his conscience, intensified by the hopeless gloom and misery of his domestic life, now passed into a form of insane delusion. He believed himself to be endowed with some mysterious and diabolical form of will-power, by which all other human wills and even the blind forces of nature were constrained to do what he desired to have done. Thus he explained to himself all those successes of his past life which to his friends and neighbors seemed proof of his wonderful luck. And so, in the burning of his wife's house, he believed that the servants in kindling the big fires

and thus starting the conflagration, had been forced by diabolical influence to become in this way the blind and unconscious instruments of his desire to have the house burned.

The form of incipient insanity here presented, beginning in Solness with an insane conviction of the power of his own will, familiar to all students of mental disease, is developed by Ibsen with intense accuracy of symptoms and effects. In all accidents of familiar life, in the casual visit of any one that he wished to see, in the sickness and death of any one that he disliked, in the success of any scheme of his scheming brain, Solness saw the potency of his own will manifested, and his importance as a factor in the universe revealed. And this sense of his importance led him to regard himself as the special object of God's concern and solicitude and jealous anger. He convinced himself, for example, that the loss of his children and the ruin of his domestic happiness, were the punishment inflicted upon him by God for having ceased to build churches and degraded his art by building houses. Thus, to propitiate God, he resumed the practice of building churches, and undertook especially the construction of a splendid church, with a tower of unusual height, in the town of Lysanger. About three years after his children's death, in September, 1881, he went to that town to celebrate the completion of the building. As part of the great ceremonial, he climbed to the summit of his own tower and hung upon its highest point the customary garland of flowers. It was a day of popular festival in the little town. The streets and public square, upon which he looked down from his own lofty height, were thronged with crowds of people, waving banners and shouting applause. The fervor of popular excitement produced at once its effect upon his disordered brain. He was exalted into sudden madness by the sense of his own importance. There, upon the dizzy summit of the spire, standing, as it were, face to face with God, and regarding himself as rival and coequal with the divine archi-

tect of the universe, he spoke to God as power to power. "Listen," he cried, "thou Mighty One! From this day on, I, too, like Thee, am going to become a True Architect. I, in my sphere, as Thou in Thine. Nevermore shall I build churches for Thee: henceforth, only houses for men." His impious words spoken so high above the earth, seemed to the crowd below the dimly heard sound of heavenly voices.

In that crowd, gazing at him from below, with such wild outburst of popular enthusiasm, there chanced to be a pretty Norwegian girl of twelve or thirteen. It was Hilde Wangel, the daughter of the physician of Lysanger, a friend of Solness. When the excitement of the day was over, while the girl's mind was all aquiver with the spectacle of the architect's triumphant ascent, Solness came as a guest to a supper at her father's house. There the childless man, watching the pretty child, and feeling a strange joy in her enthusiasm for him, took her in his arms and kissed her. In a lively moment, flushed with wine, he promised in a jesting spirit to come back for her after ten years, and make her his princess, and to build for her a splendid palace. The caress and the idle words passed completely from the mind of the care-worn man; but, in the mind of the excitable and flighty girl, they remained forever fixed, destined, in the fulness of evil days, to come back into life as pre-sage of sin and death.

That church at Lysanger was the last church that Solness built. Henceforth he gave all his energy to the building of private residences upon his wife's land and to the increase of his fortune. In the ten years that now followed, from 1881 to 1891, under the burden of a domestic misery that was always increasing, and under the impulse of insane fancies that were always thickening around him, both his mind and his character underwent degeneration. In his profession, losing his artistic impulse and intent only on money-making, he showed himself hard and mean and ungenerous. Conscious of his own lack of technical education, he became madly jealous of all younger rivals that

had enjoyed a professional training in architecture. His chief rival, a man older than himself, that Knut Brovik, in whose office he himself had formerly served, he had succeeded in ousting from his business and reducing to a humble position in his own service. But Knut had a son, Ragnar, a young fellow of good education and rather brilliant talents, who became the special object of Solness's suspicious jealousy. Him, also, Solness allured into his service by a generous salary: and it was henceforth the chief object of his crafty nature to repress the talents of the young man and to keep him from establishing an independent business. For this purpose, he carried out a scheme of peculiar cunning and malignity. Ragnar was betrothed to a young girl, named Kaja Fosli. She was, however, as poor as Ragnar himself; and so, under pretence of helping the young people to marry, Solness took Kaja into his own office as correspondent and book-keeper. In this confidential relation, he made love to the vain and foolish woman; and, without involving himself in a guilty connection with her, he won such influence over her as to destroy her love for Ragnar, and to make her profoundly unwilling to consent to any separation from Solness himself. Thus he was able to put off the marriage from year to year, and to keep Ragnar always in a dependent position. In dealing also with Ragnar's architectural designs, Solness was so sharp in criticism and fault-finding as to impair the young man's confidence in himself. And thus, although Ragnar regarded him with jealousy and bitter hatred, he was afraid to leave his service.

The signs of intimacy between Solness and Kaja had, of course, aroused the jealousy of Mrs. Solness, and made the home-life more and more wretched. In the picture of this relation between man and wife, there is, indeed, the comical element for Ibsen to render with tingling humor. But the comedy itself seems only to intensify the tragic situation. Solness felt his wife to be, in her dulness and low spirits and disagreeable ways, an intolerable burden upon



his own existence. But by strong force of will he kept his manner toward her in the main courteous and gentle. Even in his heart, there was a kind of tenderness for her, and a fine capacity to recognize whatever of good there was in her. There was the feeling, also, that the fire, which had reduced his wife to this condition of imbecility and gloom, had been the result, not indeed of his own act, but yet of his own volition. Thus he felt toward her a sense of guilt, which assumed in his diseased mind, the form of some immense burden of obligation from which he could not free himself. Her calamity had been the means of his own fortune. This feeling could not, however, prevent his suffering from the constant torture of her companionship, and from the loss of all sympathy and brightness in his desolate home. Unable to live without happiness, he had sought love in the society of other women; and the rumors of such amours had reached the unhappy wife, and led her to foolish fits of nagging jealousy. Thus, in spite of all self-control, there were times of intense irritation in the family-life, scenes of recriminations and bickerings. Under the strain of such unhappiness, the physical health of Solness gave way; and his fits of vertigo, like his fits of nervous irritability, seemed to his wife to demand the constant watching of Dr. Herdal, the family physician. To Solness, conscious of his own mental derangement and morbidly suspicious, this collusion of wife and doctor came as proof that they suspected him of being insane and wished to place him under control. It was in this state of mind, with physical health beginning to succumb, with all chance of domestic happiness gone, with moral force and mental force broken by suffering and by sin, by self-reproach and by insane delusion, that the man came to the crisis of his fate and was caught unawares in the sweeping current of a new passion. That passion, overwhelming and fatal, came upon him as we have seen, in the sudden coming of Hilde into his life. As all the longing of his nature was for sympathy and companionship and love, so there was no force in him to withstand the

temptation of the young girl's flatteries and worship. And so, in the passionate striving to escape from the misery of marriage into a new life of happiness, he came, by pressure of inevitable fate, into that course of action which led to wreck of reason and sacrifice of life. If, in all this, the details of situation and environment be prosaic, half comical and half revolting, there is the essence of tragedy in the development of the character, in the development of the emotion, and in the development of the action. Not Æschylus, not Shakspeare himself, has traced with quicker subtlety of observation the birth of a deadly passion from the calamities of a human life, and the growth of that passion into crime and ruin.

Up to this point, attention has been fixed upon the power of Ibsen, as a master of lyrical poetry, to express and develop emotion. Let it now be transferred to his manner, as master of dramatic poetry, in arranging the stages of dramatic action itself. This is the point of view that gives us the justest, and the highest, appreciation of his unsurpassed dramatic skill.

The action, as in *Hedda Gabler*, is carried on by seven characters; and here, as there, the reduction of the number of characters gives room for that profusion of psychological detail in which Ibsen delights. In *Hedda Gabler* the action completed itself in fifty-one scenes, but in *Solness* it is reduced to forty-three. It begins in the afternoon of one day, and closes in the afternoon of the next, a period of twenty-four or, possibly, twenty-six hours. But, in respect of unity of place, the limitation is not so rigid. In *Hedda Gabler*, all the action passes in a single room, but in *Solness*, instead of one scene of action there are three. First, there is the office of the old architect himself, then the drawing-room of his wife, and finally, the verandah that opens into the garden and commands a view of the new house with its fatal tower. These three shiftings of scenes are used by the poet to divide his poem into three acts of gradually diminishing length. But this division, made only for the

scene-shifter's convenience, is altogether inorganic. The true division is into the forty-three scenes, arranged in the familiar five stages of the Aristotelian scheme.

In the construction of each of these forty-three scenes, Ibsen shows once more that consummate skill in the practice of dramatic art which has made him so famous. Each scene in turn is essential to the progress of the action, essential in the very place that it holds in the sequence, essential in every speech of every character. Each scene, again, has its definite beginning, by which, in graceful but in rigid cohesion, it attaches itself to the preceding. Each scene has its flash-point by which it marks the onward movement of the story. Finally, each scene, in its manner of ending, serves as preparation for the scene that is to follow. In these points of technical execution, whatever may be the spiritual or moral worth of Ibsen's drama, there is, at least, to be admired a flawless mastery of dramatic method. In the sequence of his successive scenes, there is that strenuous and unresting force of movement which gives to the *Othello* its predominance among the Shaksperian dramas. Thus his plays, when worthily played, as for example on the royal stage of Copenhagen,<sup>1</sup> have a scenic power that is overwhelming.

In the construction of his scenes, as is to be noted, Ibsen has pressed to its highest limit the advantage of the dialogue over all other forms of scenic arrangement. The monologue, or soliloquy, is almost always false to nature, the artificial and awkward resource of an immature art. The trio-scene is, in general, weakened in its force by the presence of the third person, hindering or disturbing the movements of thought and passion in the other two. The group-scene of four or more characters can be used with real effect only to mark the attainment of some definite point in the progress of the action. But the dialogue, if well used, is the real process of the drama. It is in the dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> See, as to the merits of this great Copenhagen company of actors, the article by Wm. Archer in *Harper's Monthly* for August, 1891.

almost altogether that one soul can act upon another with the highest force of persuasion or impulsion. It represents, step by step, stroke after stroke, the march of the action to its definite goal, the triumph of will and passion over resistance. Thus, in constructing the forty-three scenes of his drama, Ibsen has only one monologue, a scene of only two words, an involuntary cry that reveals the inmost secret of Hilde's nature. Trio-scenes and group-scenes also are few and short. But dialogue-scenes are used with steady preponderance, to reveal the personal character and to work out the movements and the purposes of the personal will. Thus of the two hundred and twenty pages in which the poem is contained, one hundred and seventy pages, about four-fifths, are filled with dialogues. This is the process of Ibsen's workmanship that enables him to display with such sharpness of self-revelation, the secrets of the human soul and the motives and designs of each of his group of characters.

It is in constructing his dialogues that Ibsen reaches his highest excellence in literary form. Luckily for the world the language that he uses, an elegant and refined form of Norwegian, which rejects almost all obscurities of dialect, and conforms very closely to classic Danish, has in itself an extraordinary charm of brevity, neatness, and conversational grace. This he employs in developing for the familiar dialogue of homely modern life, a conversational style that is peculiar to his art. Without being verse, it has a distinct and delightful cadence of prose-rhythm. It is full of easy grace and of idiomatic flavor; but it is as free from vulgarity and slang as it is from rhetorical inflation. In this dialogue the speeches are always short. The longest single speech that occurs in the poem is only of some ninety words. Thus the action moves unimpeded by ranting passages or by rhetorical flourishes, or by tedious harangues. Each sentence, as it comes into its appointed place, is natural, graceful, free from the conventionality of the stage, and yet instinct with

dramatic force. In discovering the secret of the literary form to be given to the dialogue of the drama of modern life, Ibsen has done what the dramatists of other nations have as yet failed to achieve.

In the grouping of the scenes, Ibsen follows the strict law of the Aristotelian scheme. There is, indeed, as we have noticed, a disturbance of the normal proportions. The climax of the poem is thrown so far forward as to give abnormal length to the first part of the drama, and abnormal celerity of movement to the second. This is done, of course, with conscious purpose, in order to let the characters develop themselves before us with such detail-work of delineation, as will enable us to understand the emotional movement of each. But if allowance be made for this necessary disturbance of balance, the arrangement of the first part is regular and classical.

The first part of the poem, the protasis, completes itself in twelve scenes, in fifty pages out of two hundred and ten, about one-fourth of the whole. It introduces to us, in scenes of lively dramatic interest, all the group of seven characters, each one in its full connection with the central figure. First of all, Solness shows himself in his relation to the Ragnar family, father and son, a relation ungenerous and cruel. Then he shows himself in his profoundly immoral relation to poor Kaja and to his suspicious and unhappy wife. Then in his talk with Dr. Herdal, the family physician, Solness reveals the tragical sorrow of his life, and that morbid state of mind which is verging on insanity. There is nothing forgotten, nothing blurred, nothing superfluous. At last, in the twelfth scene, Hilde is introduced, a figure most lively and picturesque, fresh from her town in the Norwegian mountains, and intent on renewing acquaintance with the famous architect, who had kissed her with so much ardor in her childhood. At this point, with Hilde's introduction, the protasis is complete.

The second part of the poem, epitasis, fills fourteen scenes, one hundred and seven pages, almost exactly one-

half of the whole. It begins with the scene of opening action. Solness, yielding to the girl's broad hints, invites Hilde to come as a guest into his house; and he recognizes in her coming that influence of youth upon his fortune which, for good or for evil, has been so long the haunting dream of his life. Hilde is there. "Youth has come and knocked at his door." It is, as he notes, the nineteenth of September, the tenth anniversary of that day on which he had kissed the child at Lysanger, and promised to make her his princess. Thus Hilde, with the grimly given consent of Mrs. Solness, is received as a guest in the Solness household and installed in the nursery-rooms, which, since the death of the two boys, had stood so pathetically empty. Little by little, she conveys to the old architect the sense of her passionate admiration of him, and draws from him, bit by bit, the secrets and the sorrows of his life. She inspires him with courage to rise superior to the mean jealousies of his profession; and she cajoles him into giving his approval to the drawings of young Ragnar, and thus enabling him to begin the independent practice of his art. She arouses the jealousy of Mrs. Solness by her sudden intimacy with her husband; and by displaying her own jealousy of Kaja, she forces Solness to dismiss the girl from his services, and to send her home, heart-broken and desperate, to marry Ragnar. Here the plot has reached the culminating point. The passion of Solness begins to be aroused, and his brooding melancholy is changed into youthful fire. There is a delightful touch of comedy in the old man's boyish eagerness to please the young girl that loves him, and to live up to her ideals.

Here, then, in the twenty-seventh scene, complete, in two pages, comes the climax of the drama, that central scene of composition whose meaning has been already interpreted. In tone and artistic management, it is a passage of lively comedy. In dramatic force it is the centre and soul of the tragedy. Solness, as we have seen, in order to please Hilde, resolves to comply with her romantic whim, and, in spite of

his weak head and his nagging wife, to climb the tower, and to hang the wreath of flowers. It is the blending of comical incident here with tragical import that makes this scene a masterpiece of dramatic workmanship.

At this point (p. 160) the action passes into its fourth stage, the catabasis. This completes itself in eleven scenes, in fifty-one pages. Here, in accord with Ibsen's method, the action moves onward with accelerated speed. For, as the characters have been already defined, and the problem and the emotion of the drama made clear at full length, there is nothing now to retard the march of those events that flow from Solness's decision. The old man having come to his fatal resolve, yields himself more and more to Hilde's fascination. He implores her to live with him and be his princess, in the fine new house that he is about to occupy. Then comes as scene of dramatic reverses, as *peripetia* of the classical scheme, the only monologue of the drama, the 29th scene. As Solness leaves her to make arrangements for the afternoon, Hilde thinks of seeing the queer old fellow, for her sake, climb the tower and hang the garland. She enjoys at once the sense of her own triumph and the humor of the grotesque situation. All she says is, "Awfully exciting." Thus the feat that means life or death for Solness, is only fun and excitement for Miss Hilde, only the gratification of her desire for a novel sensation. Here again, by those two words Ibsen has combined the comical force of the situation with its tragical significance. He has revealed also by a sharp flash of humor, the folly and madness of Solness's hopes. From this point on, the passion of Solness himself increases in guilty fervor. He beats down by his passionate pleadings the half-formed resolution of Hilde to leave his house and refrain from wronging his wife. He throws himself with mad enthusiasm into a scheme of freeing himself from the bonds of marriage and of living with Hilde a life of love in some air castle of romance. His wild talk half frightens the girl, and half fascinates her. But at this crisis of her fate, she learned from Ragnar, how Solness had

made love to Kaja, and how his workmen were sneering at his lack of courage in being afraid to climb the tower of his own house. Thus, to assure herself both of Solness's courage and of the reality of his love, Hilde became all the more intent upon the fulfilment of his promise. That should be the test of her lover's love. If he did that for her, so as to show his devotion and to confute Ragnar's slanders she and her kisses and all the radiance and joy of her youth should be his forever. There was once more the physical shrinking of the old architect, weak-headed at best and now half-crazed by excitement, from the danger of the ascent. But his passion rose into contempt of danger and into the frenzy of insanity. Yes, he would climb the tower once more, and there, as before at Lysanger, high aloft in the sky, hurl defiance in the face of that cruel God who had sought to crush him by wrong and anguish of heart. He would climb the tower, and descend from it, in order to be folded in Hilde's arms and blessed by her love, restored at length to youth and happiness. And so, in this awful tumult of amorous rage and of insane hopes, he steals away from Hilde under the false pretense of giving orders to his workmen, in order to reach the ladder and begin the ascent of the tower. Here, then, in the final parting between Solness and Hilde, Ibsen places the close of the dramatic catabasis. The promise made in the climax has led, through eleven scenes of passionate energy, to this final act of madness, which is at once so wicked and so absurd. Throughout the whole passage, the thread of the comical situation is kept firmly twisted with the thread of tragical emotion, so that laughter and humor go on from stage to stage inseparable.

At this point, the fortieth scene, the action reaches its final stage, the catastrophe. All the characters, except Solness himself, are grouped around Mrs. Solness, upon the verandah of the old house, in order to see the garland hung upon the tower of the new one. It is a social gathering of friends and neighbors, full of animation and gaiety. Only Hilde knows that Solness himself is going to climb the



tower. The others believe that he has, of course, left to his foreman the honor of the perilous feat. Slowly, round after round, seen by the company on the porch, but unseen by the audience, the figure of a man is now discerned climbing the ladder that leads up to the tower. All at once, the cry runs from person to person that the man climbing the ladder is Solness himself. There is the shriek of terror from the wife, and the shout of exultation from Hilde. Solness is seen to reach the summit, to hang the wreath, and to wave his arms as if in prayer or in speech. There is in the crowd upon the porch, the hush of agonizing suspense. Dr. Herdal has warned them that movement or noise from below might shake Solness's nerves and confuse his eyes. But Hilde's excitement in the triumph of her lover at last overthrows her self-control. She waves her white shawl in the air, and starts the shout that goes up to honor the old architect's deed of daring. It is the waving of the white shawl and the shouting of the crowd that dazes the old man's vision. He is seen to totter, to slip, and at last to tumble from his airy height. The poor wife swoons and is carried into the house. Hilde stands stupefied, unable, at first, to take in what has happened. The crowd rushes off to find Solness crushed into a shapeless mass. But Hilde cries in exultation "Well, he got all the way to the top: I heard harps in the air." And she waves that white shawl once more.

In this effort to interpret the masterpiece of Ibsen's dramatic art, no use has been made of that astounding method of the newest criticism which seeks to discover in the incidents of the Solness story a profound allegory of human existence. It has not been indicated, for example, that the nine dolls, so dear to Mrs. Solness in her married life, represent the ideals of youthful love that married people treasure up in their elderly hearts, nor that old Solness climbing the tower is a symbol of human ambition aspiring to dangerous heights. Yet these triumphs of allegorical interpretation, and others by dozens, have been set forth with many fine words by men that have a reputation as critics of litera-

ture. There is, in fact, no worse sign of the lawless and fantastic spirit of modern criticism than the prevalence of such absurdities. They show how deeply the jargon and the cant of mysticism have penetrated into that lofty region of sane reason, the theory and practice of criticism. When applied to such a work as Ibsen's *Solness*, this allegorical method becomes an insult at once to the greatness of the poet and to the intelligence of his readers. Between dramatic poetry, which is the highest form of human art, and allegory, which is one of the lowest, there can be no community of ideal or of method. The presence of the lower tendency is at once and always destructive of the higher aim. Thus, if *Solness* were a mystic allegory of human fate, it would cease to excite interest as a picture and criticism of human life. If the ascent of the tower and the fatal fall were symbols, they would lose their import and their emotional force as events. The method of the real drama, therefore, excludes, at peril of its existence, all mysticism, all symbolism, all fantastic play with parables and abstractions. It is the most definite, the most precise, the most concrete of all forms of poetry, the least capable of double meanings and symbolical suggestions. Thus, if *Solness* were an allegory, it would be something too silly and too inartistic to deserve study. It is a great and memorable drama, just because it is free from such vagueness of indefinite symbolism, just because it deals with realities, with sharp and definite conceptions, according to a sharp and definite method. It takes rank among the great works of the modern drama, because it portrays the characters of one definite group of human beings, as conceived by the poet in one definite environment of situation, acting under the impulse of perfectly definite emotions, and doing and suffering the very things, right or wrong, that as real human beings, in such circumstances, it was inevitable they should do and suffer.

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